

Sri:
Sriman Narayana Charanau Sharanam

Kapyasam Pundarikam – a reflection

Shri Yadavaprakasa's interpretation of the Chandogya Upanishad verse 1.6.7 "tasya yathA kapyAsam puNDarIkamevamakShiNI", being similar to that of Swami Sankaracharya, and Swami Ramanujacharya being deeply disturbed by the analogy in the interpretation, occupies a significant point in hagiographies about Swami Ramanujacharya's life.

The following monograph attempts to critically review the applicability of the interpretation by Swami Sankaracharya and validity of the refutation by Swami Ramanujacharya & later Visishtadvaitins.

Shri Yadavaprakasa - Bhedabhedavadin; not Advaitin:

To begin with, it is considered inaccurate to categorize Shri Yadavaprakasa as an Advaitin. There are sufficient proofs from the quotations of Swami Ramanujacharya, Shri Sudarshana Suri and Swami Vedanta Desikan to demonstrate that the point of view of Shri Yadavaprakasa correspond to a sub-school of Bhedabheda vadam. The Bhedabheda philosophy is quite different from both Swami Sankaracharya's Advaita as well as Swami Ramanujacharya's Visishtadvaita. The earliest extent Bhedabhedavadin is Shri Bhaskaracharya, a fierce critic of Swami Sankaracharya. His philosophy is called Aupadhika Bhedabhedavada. Shri Yadavaprakasa's philosophy, though differing from Shri Bhaskaracharya, is called Svabhavika Bhedabhedavada. With this being so, Shri Yadavaprakasa is a Bhedabhedavadin and not an Advaitin.

Since Swami Sankaracharya's Advaita is the primary purvapaksha for Visistadvaitins, the association of Shri Yadavaprakasa with "Advaita" is really an outcome of post-Swami Ramanujacharya rivalries between Visistadvaitins and Advaitins. It became convenient to use the label "Advaita" for many purvapakshas.

Thus, one will find Visistadvaita scholars (in lectures) refer to Shri Bhaskaracharya's school as Bhaskaraadvaita and Shri Yadavaprakasa's school as Yadaadvaita when describing the respective philosophies. There are a few scholars [1] who explicitly say that Swami Sankaracharya, Shri Bhaskaracharya and Shri Yadavaprakasha all are expounding on "Advaita" only. This is however as inaccurate as stating Swami Ramanujacharya's Visishtadvaita (visishta advaita or savishesha advaita) is also "Advaita" only.

References:

[1] Sri Adoor Asuri Madhavachariar: (<https://youtu.be/x1yvEXw7eUI>) [6:03 - 6:53]

Sarvartha Siddhi Of Sri Vedanta Desika by Dr V N Seshadri Acharya

(<https://archive.org/details/sarvarthasiddhiofsrivedantadesikadrnseshadriacharya1993ocr/page/n49/mode/1up>)

Bhedabheda Vedanta (<https://iep.utm.edu/bhedabheda-vedanta/#SH1c>)

Vipasana: BHEDABHEDA: Sages from the Hindu Scriptures: BHASKARA, YADAVAPRAKASHA, BHARTRPRAPANCHA

(<https://vipasana-vidushika.blogspot.com/2018/11/bhedabheda-bhaskara-yadavaprakasha.html>)

Yadava Prakaasa – Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yadava_Prakaasa) (for further references)

As we move on to the main topic, we will review the validity of Swami Sankaracharya's interpretation on the grounds of 1) contextual intent 2) Applicability of the interpretation 3) Appropriateness of the interpretation with respect to Swami Ramanujacharya's critical refutation. The focus will be on Swami Sankaracharya's interpretation and not whether Swami Ramanujacharya's alternate interpretation is correct or not.

1) Intent:

The objective here is to understand the intent of the Upanishadic statement, in the light of Swami Sankaracharya's interpretation, and review if a similar intent is expressed elsewhere in other scriptural texts:

Per Swami Sankaracharya, the phrase “kapyAsam puNDarIkamevamakShiNI” is meant to imply “extremely bright (reddish) lotus like eyes”. The “extreme brightness (or reddishness)”, in turn, implied through the analogy of a monkey. The focus first, is to review if the intent “reddish lotus like” is a valid description of the Lord's eyes.

The following references describe Lord's eyes in the same / similar way:

Divya Prabandham: Thiruvaimozhi 1.9.3 - based on vAdhi kEsari azhagiya maNavALa jIyar's 12000 padi

“emperumAn who has no defects such as decline etc., who is eternal, who has unlimited auspicious qualities, who is the leader of nithyasUris and the cause for their existence etc., who has nice blackish bluish bodily complexion, one who has a reddish lotus like divine eyes (that looks contrasting to the blackish form), one who climbs with great desire on garudAzhwaR who has abundant feathers, who is the singular enjoyer of the most enjoyable srl mahAlakshmi who is like the embodiment of flower's fragrance, after being with me giving one particular aspect of enjoyment, does not leave me.”

There are at least 20 more instances of describing Perumal's eyes as reddish lotus (sendhamarai).

Guna Ratna Kosam: Shloka 40: Meaning according to Dr. V. N. Vedantha Desikan

“There is a very interesting result; His eyes, which were originally, rightly, described as black like beetles, have become red; He is now described by the VedAs too as the One, the Only One, to be fit to be called the red-lotus eyed Lord. No One else can lay claim for this distinction.”

Vishnu Sahasranamam: Bhashyam by Shri Parasara Bhattar:

Lohitakshah (59): “the red-eyed”

“He has eyes, red like the beautiful lotus, indicative of the excessive joy that is His.”

Srimad Bhagavatam: 10.39.46

“Akrura then saw the Bhagavan lying peacefully on the lap of Lord Ananta Sesa. The complexion of that Supreme Person was like a dark-blue cloud. He wore yellow garments and had four arms and reddish lotus-petal eyes.”

Similarly, there are numerous references to reddish eyes or reddish lotus like eyes.

Vishnu Purana:

4.13.10 - Describes the Sun God (Aditya) to have reddish eyes

5.18.36 - Describes eyes of Balarama as reddish lotus petals eyes

5.18.39 - Describes eyes of Krishna as coppery eyes

Padma Purana:

6.229.98 - Describes Vishnu’s eyes resemble petals of a red lotus

Considering few other Puranas,

Shiva Purana:

7.2.6.12-16 - Describes Brahman as golden colored, golden hair, golden arms, lotus eyes of reddish-copper color

Vayu Purana:

50.45 - Describes Adishesha to have red lotus like eyes

Thus, we have several instances describing the Lord’s eyes to be like lotus or reddish in color or like red lotus.

These are some of the common descriptions apart from others. Therefore, attempting to describe the Lord’s eyes as “reddish lotus like” is not out of place in the Chandogya Upanishad.

2) Applicability:

Having seen that the intent of describing the Lord's eyes to be like "reddish lotus", is indeed popular and common across different scriptures, the next step is to review the applicability of the said monkey analogy to imply "reddishness" of the lotus. The analogy mentioned is specifically for the brightness / reddishness of the lotus. This specific characteristic of the lotus is like that of the seat (nates) of a monkey.

Some of the common terms used to describe reddishness are Tamil: Sem (red), Sanskrit: Aruna (color of dawn), Raktha (color of blood), Lohita (red color) etc. In this case, per Swami Sankaracharya's interpretation, the Upanishad describes through Kapyasah - kapehe (of a monkey) asa (seat) or the seat of a monkey. "Of the diety; 'aksini', the two eyes; are like 'pundarikam', a lotus; which is extremely bright; 'kapyasam iva', like the seat of a monkey." Meaning, the eyes of the deity are extremely bright like a red lotus which has a resemblance of the seat of the monkey.

The reddishness (or reddish-brown) is also characteristic of words like Kapila, Kapisha, kapilaka, kapilaya, kapila-sinsapa flower.

Here are some real world pictures to substantiate such a comparison:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=monkey+backside>

3) Appropriateness:

Having seen that the analogy of a monkey is applicable to describe "reddishness", the last step is to review the appropriateness of the usage of "Kapyasam" in the description of the Lord's eyes.

The Chandogya Upanishad 1.6.6-7 says the person seen in the Sun is the golden person, with golden hair and golden beard. Whose every part from nail upwards is golden. Of that person, his two eyes are like the lotus whose characteristics is that of the seat of a monkey.

Describing the color of the person, which is golden through and through, the speciality of the eyes alone is called out next. The two eyes are said to be like bright red lotus, as against golden color everywhere else. This contrast of the eyes with respect to the rest of the body is quite common, as seen in Thiruvaimozhi 1.9.3.

The word 'asa' in 'kapyasam' is usually translated as 'nates' or 'posterior' or 'rump' or 'buttocks' or 'butt' or, lately as 'anus'. Though this is implied, this is inaccurate; and particularly with 'anus' makes it seem more derogatory, a mere exaggeration!

Swami Sankaracharya, in the Bhashyam, has explicitly provided the derivation; “the word ‘asa’ (seat) being derived from the root ‘as’ with the suffix ‘ghan’ in the instrumental case, in the sense of 'sitting' - (meaning) the lowest part of the back of a monkey on which it sits”. Therefore, the correct accurate translation and interpretation of ‘Kapyasam’, per Swami Sankaracharya, is “the seat of a monkey (or the back part on which it sits)”.

Furthermore, there are several instances (as seen below) wherein the comparison is misinterpreted to begin with. Instead of a 2-level comparison, namely comparing Lord’s eyes to a lotus and the brightness / color of the lotus compared to the seat of a monkey, the comparison is misinterpreted as Lord’s eyes directly to monkey’s seat. This, again, misguides and exaggerates the dichotomy.

Ramanuja List Archive: tasya yathA kapyAsam puNdareekamEvamakshiNI

(<https://www.ibiblio.org/sripedia/ramanuja/archives/jun02/msg00028.html>)

Enter, Ramanuja: The Ramanuja Series – thevvlens

(<https://vidsvur.wordpress.com/2019/04/30/enter-ramanuja-the-ramanuja-series/>)

<https://apnswami.files.wordpress.com/2022/05/book-60-ramanuja-vaibhavam-1-megathin-dagam-english.pdf>

The Glories of Ramanujacarya

(<https://www.purebhakti.com/teachers/bhakti-discourses/26-discourses-2007/934-the-glories-of-ramanujacarya>)

Dramidopanishat Prabhava Sarvasvam 8 | SrlvaishNava granthams

(<https://srivaishnavagranthams.wordpress.com/2018/02/06/dramidopanishat-prabhava-sarvasvam-8/>)

Ramanujacharya . The proponent of Vishishtadvaita Philosophy

(<http://www.mypanchang.com/ramanuja.php>)

Swami Sankaracharya, anticipating such criticisms, explicitly states that this is “na hinopama” (not derogatory or blasphemous), since “upamitopamanatvat” (because that which compares, is itself compared with another). In other words, here the brightness / reddishness of the lotus is specifically compared to the seat of a monkey, and the eyes of the Lord are compared to the lotus only.

If indeed the ancient Vedic seers (the Vedas) meant to communicate the brightness / reddishness of the lotus through the word “kapyasam”, in this Vedanta statement, it is appropriate to faithfully explain the same in the bhashyam.

Few quick side notes:

A) To be accurate, Swami Sankaracharya's interpretation is "the two eyes are like a lotus, which is extremely bright like the seat of a monkey". There is no "reddishness" or color mentioned, but only that the lotus is "extremely bright (atyanta tejasvi)" like the seat of a monkey. However, later Advaita acharyas and translators have incorporated "reddishness" as the color of the lotus.

B) Swami Sankaracharya's interpretation is independent of Shri Yadavaprakasa's actual interpretation or the subsequent understanding thereof. Meaning, it is indeed possible that Shri Yadavaprakasa, while explaining the Upanishad Vakyam, could have erroneously misinterpreted Swami Sankaracharya's bhashyam. Or it is possible that there could have been a subsequent misunderstanding in understanding Shri Yadavaprakasa's explanation. But, either way, the current translation is indeed a misinterpretation of Swami Sankaracharya's bhashyam.

C) If Bhagavan is the material cause of all and pervades everything, including all living and non-living things; the parts of a monkey are also transformations of Bhagavan and thus Bhagavan pervades the back portion (asa) of a monkey as well. This back portion cannot be derogatory in any spiritual or philosophical sense except perhaps from a purely emotional standpoint.

D) It is said, "every morning at the Srirangam Temple on the banks of the river Kaveri, when the doors of the shrine are opened, the deity, Shri Ranganathaswamy, is made to see a cow's posterior. Viewing a cow's backside is considered auspicious. Metaphorically, the cow's rear embodies Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, who is the consort of Shri Ranganathaswamy." The posterior of an animal, by itself is not derogatory.

<https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/how-did-the-cow-become-sacred-in-india>

<https://www.tirthayatra.org/yesterdays-morning-in-srirangam-was-a-melodious-dream/>

<https://srirangaminfo.com/Srirangam-puja.php>

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